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*Strange things can happen on back country roads . . .*



Captain Robertson had sent Ralph and me to Green Bay to quiz a likely murder suspect in custody there; however, our trip proved unprofitable.

Rather than take the monotonous intrastate highway for our return journey, we consulted our map and elected to drive the scenic back roads.

Late in the afternoon, as we were traveling through a forest corridor,

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our motor began losing power and then stopped entirely.

Ralph let the car coast onto the shoulder of the road, where he tried to restart it. The motor turned over, but refused to catch.

After a while, we got out of the car, raised the hood, and studied the motor.

"What are we looking for, Ralph?"

He rubbed his neck. "Damned if I know. I took woodworking in high school."

We poked and pressed various things and then got hopefully back into the car. It still refused to start.

Ralph gave up. "We're running down the battery. We'll just have to sit here until somebody gives one of us a lift to the nearest garage."

We waited more than an hour, but not a single car passed, either coming or going. It was beginning to get dark.

"Ralph," I said, "I just noticed a driveway about a hundred yards ahead. Maybe there's a house at the end of it and we can get to use a phone."

Ralph put the glove-compartment flashlight into his pocket and we got out of the car—and found that the driveway was actually a rather narrow country road.

I peered into the distance. "There seems to be a hamlet of sorts ahead."

After five minutes of walking, we reached the first building.

"By Jove," I said, "that's a one-room schoolhouse! I didn't think there were any still in operation in this state."

Ralph regarded it without undue interest. "I don't think this one is either. The windows are black with dirt."

I yielded. "Perhaps you're right. However, that does present us with an anomaly. The schoolhouse appears to be unused and yet there is not one blade of grass in the school yard, which indicates heavy traffic."

"The kids are probably bused to school somewhere else," Ralph said. "But that doesn't mean they don't still use the school yard as a playground when they come back." Then he frowned. "What the hell is that?"

"What the hell is what?"

He pointed to a thick rope dangling from the limb of a huge oak tree, its end featuring a rather impressive hangman's noose.

"There must be some logical explanation," I said. "We'll have to re-

member to ask."

We continued walking. A number of the buildings in the hamlet appeared to be deserted and falling into ruin. Occasionally we saw a dim light behind the curtains in some of the windows.

Ralph had been looking at the roofs. "Not one TV antenna in the town."

"It probably has cable TV."

At the end of the street, as though welcoming us, stood a fair-sized two-story structure that appeared to be an inn.

Ralph still looked about as we talked. "Where are the people? The kids who trample the grass in the yard of a school they don't use and play with hangmen's nooses? I haven't seen a soul since we came here."

"They're peeking at us."

"Peeking?"

"Yes. From behind their curtains. If you use your peripheral vision, you'll notice movement as we pass."

Ralph flexed his peripheral vision. "You're right, Henry. They're hiding in their houses and peeking at us. Why are they doing that, Henry?"

"We're strangers in town, Ralph. People in hamlets always peek at strangers."

"Another thing," Ralph said. "I haven't seen a single car—moving or standing still."

We arrived at the two-story building, walked up the wide wooden steps, and entered the building.

The place was rather inadequately lit by several oil or kerosene lanterns suspended from ceiling chains.

A tall thin individual of indeterminate age stood behind the hotel desk. He allowed his mouth a thin smile as we approached him.

"Is there a garage in town?" I asked.

"Garage?" The desk clerk seemed to think that over for a moment.

"No, there's no garage in this village."

Ralph looked about. "I'd like to use your phone."

"We don't have a phone."

Ralph frowned. "This is a hotel, but you don't have a phone?"

"No one in town has a phone."

Ralph looked at me as though it were all my fault. "Great! We're

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stranded in the middle of nowhere and we pick a town without telephones. We might as well hike back to the car and wait for somebody to come along."

"It's nearly dark now," the desk clerk said. "And it's very unlikely that any other car will use that road tonight."

"Ralph," I said, "We might as well stay here for the night and go back to the car in the morning. There's no need for us to be uncomfortable. And remember that the department pays our expenses."

The desk clerk turned the register. I considered the steel-nibbed pen and the inkstand for a moment and decided to use my ballpoint. I wrote on the first line of the blank page: *Det/Sgt Henry J. Turnbuckle, MPD.*

The clerk watched me write. "MPD? Is that some kind of a title or decoration?"

I smiled modestly. "Milwaukee Police Department."

Ralph signed in too.

"Two singles or a double?" the desk clerk asked.

"I don't suppose you have TV?" Ralph asked without much hope.

"No, sir. No TV."

"In that case make it a double. Henry and I will talk to each other for entertainment."

The desk clerk handed over a tagged key. "Your room is Number 21."

There appeared to be a small empty dining room to one side. "Do you serve meals?" I asked.

The desk clerk smiled again. "Yes."

Ralph and I went into the dining room and seated ourselves.

He looked around. "What kind of a place is this?"

I chuckled. "Does the decor puzzle you?"

"What's decor?"

"The decor of this establishment. The theme. Don't you see, Ralph, they've recreated the atmosphere of a bygone day—the lamps, the pen and inkstand, the clothing the desk clerk is wearing. The theme of this hotel is the year 1847."

"What makes you zero in on 1847?"

"The calendar behind the clerk's desk. The month is October 1847."

Ralph was not impressed. "They're not doing much business. We're the only ones here. Where's the menu?"

"In the old days most small hotels didn't have printed menus. You ate what they cooked."

The desk clerk had disappeared, but now he returned with two large steins of beer, evidently on the house. He put them on the table. "Supper will be ready in twenty minutes. We're having roast beef." He was about to leave again.

"Just one second," Ralph said. "When we came into town, we noticed a rope with a noose hanging from a tree in the school yard."

The desk clerk's eyes flickered. "Yes, sir. That's the hanging tree. That's where the witch was hanged."

"What witch?" Ralph asked.

"Rebecca Winthrop. She was hanged by the neck until she was dead. In the year 1847."

I nodded. "To be precise, on October twenty-ninth, 1847?"

"That's correct, sir."

I smiled. "And on every October twenty-ninth the town puts a rope up there to commemorate the event?"

"Yes, sir."

Ralph watched him depart. "That's one hell of a coincidence. Today just happens to be October twenty-ninth."

"Ralph, there's no coincidence involved at all. If we had come here on October the first, he would have told us that the witch was hanged on October first, 1847. And if we'd come here on June tenth, he would have said that she was hanged on June tenth."

Ralph sighed. "Well, at least they've settled on the year." He looked past me and seemed to stiffen slightly. I turned to see what was drawing his attention and saw a woman standing in the doorway.

She wore a plain full gown that reached from a high lace collar to the floor. I imagine this must have been the height of fashion in 1847. She was probably the hotel hostess, I thought.

She came forward. "I trust that everything is satisfactory?" Her eyes were green.

"Fine," I said. "We've just been tantalized by your hanging tree and your witch. Could you provide us with a little more information?"

She smiled slowly. "Of course. This inn was built by Joseph Winthrop in the early 1840s. It was one of the overnight stopping places on the coach road between Green Bay and Milwaukee. The inn prospered and this hamlet grew around it. In 1847, Joseph, who was a bachelor,

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decided to go back to his native New England to look for a wife. He returned with Rebecca. A month later, he died delirious and raving and this place became hers."

Her eyes seemed to gleam a bit. "Unexplained things began happening in the village—mysterious fires, pets disappearing, and children having spells. They would go into fits and trances and speak in strange tongues. It was rumored that sometimes guests at the hotel would simply disappear. No one could remember seeing them leave. The townspeople began to be afraid of meeting Rebecca's eyes and some thought she could cast spells.

"The misfortunes and fears grew until on the night of October twenty-nine, 1847, they reached a head and the townspeople gathered in front of this hotel. At ten in the evening they stormed up to the second floor where Rebecca had her room. They dragged her down the stairs to the school yard where they put a rope around her neck. They allowed her some last words, hoping that she would admit to being a witch and ask forgiveness from Heaven."

Ralph was wide-eyed. "Did she?"

"No. But before she died, she placed a curse on the town. Every year, on the anniversary of her death, someone in the village must be hanged by the villagers themselves until there was but one villager left and then he must hang himself."

Ralph blinked. "How many people were there in this village at the time?"

"Ninety-three."

He did some figuring and seemed relieved. "Well, *if* this curse really worked the last villager would have hung himself in 1940."

I smiled. "Someone *in* the village? Not someone *of* the village? An unfortunate loophole, from her point of view, but one upon which the villagers seized?"

Her eyes flashed for a moment. "Yes, they did."

I turned back to Ralph. "In other words, the annual victim does not have to be a *bona fide* resident. The villagers could meet their annual quota with some transient. Some guest from this very hotel, perhaps. Though I imagine there were times when there were no strangers in town and the villagers were forced to feed upon themselves?"

"Yes," she said. "There were times."

Ralph stared at the lace around her throat. "How many people live

in this village now?"

"Thirty-eight."

"All right," Ralph said. "Just *suppose* this curse really worked. Why didn't the people here get up and leave? Why wait to get hanged?"

I smiled. "Ralph, you understand nothing at all about curses. When a town is cursed, nobody can leave. There's something like a force field around it."

Our hostess nodded faintly. "I must leave you now."

When she was gone, the erstwhile desk clerk, now our waiter, brought us our meal.

Ralph detained him. "Where do your kids go to school? I mean, they're bused out of town, aren't they? Past the force—" He reddened slightly. "They do get past the town limits, don't they?"

"There are no children here any more," the waiter said. "They all grew up."

"Who was that woman who was here just a moment ago?" I asked.

He didn't look at me. "I saw no woman."

When he left us, Ralph drained his mug of beer and looked as though he wanted another. I pushed my stein toward him. "Take mine, Ralph. I'm allergic to beer."

The meal was quite tasty, though plain, but Ralph merely picked at his food.

When we finished, I rose. "I doubt if there's very much doing in a town of thirty-eight people after dark. We might as well turn in early."

I stopped at a window and peered out at the moonlit night. "I can see the schoolhouse yard from here. It looks as though there are two nooses hanging from the tree now. Probably a flaw in the window-pane creates that illusion."

Ralph looked and rubbed the back of his neck. He looked around as though to make certain we were alone, then he stepped behind the clerk's desk and took one of several keys from hook Number 28.

"Ralph," I said, "what are you doing?"

"Changing rooms," he said. "I'm superstitious about the number twenty-one."

When we entered room Number 28, Ralph was forced to use his flashlight until we could get one of the table lamps going. Then he locked the door and ran the bolt.

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He took off his suit coat and sat down on a wooden rocking chair. He began rocking thoughtfully as he stared at the door.

I looked for something to read. I expected to find a Bible in the top drawer of the dresser, but there was none. I opened other drawers and discovered a leather-bound volume of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

I made myself comfortable near the lantern and glanced at Ralph. He had removed his shoes and appeared to have dropped off to sleep.

I read for some time before I became aware of the sounds of many voices outside the building. I went to the window, but could see nothing except the forest to the rear of the structure.

The voices were apparently coming from the front of the hotel. I listened. Yes, they were getting definitely louder. There were angry shouts and even curses. There seemed to be quite a mob.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost ten.

I shook Ralph. "Ralph, you won't want to miss any of this," I said. But he slept like someone drugged.

The mob began tramping up the hall stairs.

I went to the door, ran back the bolt, and turned the knob before I realized the door was locked. I went back to Ralph and searched his coat. Where the devil had he put the key?

Somewhere down the hall I now heard the sounds of a door being broken down.

I knelt to the keyhole, trying to see through, but it appeared to be blocked. Damn it, I thought, I'm missing everything.

Entirely frustrated, I listened to the crowd milling around in the corridor.

After a few moments more, there seemed to be a general movement for the stairs and the sound of feet marching down.

The sounds diminished, moved to the outside of the building, and gradually faded away.

I went to the window again, but of course I could see nothing from there. If only Ralph and I had taken the room to which we were assigned, we undoubtedly would have had a perfect view of all the proceedings.

I sighed and tried to wake Ralph once more, but I was unsuccessful. Rather than have him spend the night in the rocking chair, I used a fireman's carry to get him to his bed, where he lay, dead to the world.

I read a bit more of *Paradise Lost* and then went to sleep myself.

I woke at eight the next morning. It was daylight but quite foggy outside. One could hardly see more than a dozen feet beyond the window.

Ralph finally opened his eyes. Then they widened. He whipped out his service revolver and stared wildly at the door to our room.

Clearly he had awakened from some nightmare. "Ralph," I said, "snap out of it."

He seemed to be quite groggy, but he slowly pulled himself together. He stared at the window. "It's daylight," he said in a tone that indicated surprise at seeing it.

"Yes, it's morning," I said. "And you missed everything. As a matter of fact, so did I."

"What did I miss?"

"The reenactment of the original hanging," I said. "Or possibly the mock lynching of one of the villagers. I didn't see any of it myself, but it sounded terrific. The mob stormed up the stairs, broke down a door, and undoubtedly carried a victim to the hanging tree, where, if we had been able to watch, we would have seen him or her very realistically strung up."

Ralph closed his eyes for a moment. Then he found his shoes, shook the hotel key out of one of them, and put them on. He slipped into his jacket, unlocked the door, and peered out. "All right," he said, "let's get the hell out of here."

Down the corridor, I saw a splintered door hanging ajar on one hinge. "Yes, sir, it must have been quite a show."

Ralph seemed in a hurry to leave. When we reached the lobby, the desk was unattended. As a matter of fact, the hotel gave the impression of being entirely deserted. "Hallo!" I called. "Hallo?"

"Shut up, Henry," Ralph said. "We don't want to wake anybody."

"But we can't leave without paying."

He headed for the front door. "They know we're from MPD. Let them send the bill."

I checked the hotel register for a moment and then joined Ralph in the fog outside.

I chuckled. "I'll bet we find an effigy dangling from the hanging tree. I wonder if it will be the witch or one of the townspeople."

Ralph frowned. "They'll be waiting in the fog. They expect us to go back the way we came."

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"Ralph," I said, "what are you babbling about?"

He looked up at the hazy sun. "It's morning and the sun rises in the east and the road is east of this damn town." He took my arm and we walked toward what he had so cleverly deduced was the east.

We had traversed perhaps a hundred yards when suddenly we were in another world. The sun shone bright and it was a beautiful clear morning.

I looked back into a solid patch of fog. I could see neither the hotel nor the town. "Lousy town planning," I said. "They built the place in a low-lying pocket. I'll bet they get lots of fog every morning until the sun burns it off."

Ralph found a lane leading through the woods and we eventually reached the road. I saw our car still parked on the shoulder, half a mile or so away.

Ralph insisted upon walking rapidly and I was a bit winded by the time we reached the car and got in.

Ralph put the key into the ignition.

"Ralph," I said, "if it didn't start last night, it's not going to start this morning."

The motor caught immediately and Ralph pulled away from the shoulder, tires spurring gravel.

He drove rather fast and he didn't slow down until the car reached a county highway. "So you think the people in that town reenacted a hanging just for our benefit? That broken door was to room Number twenty-one, wasn't it? The one we were supposed to occupy?"

"No, Ralph. It was Number twenty-five."

Ralph frowned. "It wasn't twenty-one?" He drove silently for a while. "The villagers staged the whole thing? They busted down an expensive door just for the entertainment of *two* guests?"

"They probably buy their doors wholesale. Or at least they're seconds. And when you're scheduled to put on a performance, you don't cancel it just because you have a limited audience. The show must go on. Besides, we weren't the only guests. There were two others."

Ralph blinked. "Two others?"

"Yes. I checked the hotel register when we left and two other people registered after we did. They must have arrived after we went up to our room. A Mr. and Mrs. John Smith." I smiled. "They could disappear from the face of this earth and nobody would ever know what

their real names were."

Ralph slowed the car abruptly and made a U-turn.

"Ralph, what are you doing?"

"Going back."

"But why?"

"Because now I'm a cop first and scared second. So they decided it would be easier to take Mr. and Mrs. John Smith than two policemen, one of whom didn't drink his beer."

What was he mumbling about now?

We reached the forest road again and Ralph slowed the car, his eyes searching the roadside. Finally he stopped. "The road's gone. The whole damn road *and* the town."

I looked about. "I think we've probably got the wrong road."

"No," Ralph said. "We haven't got the wrong road. Everything should be here, but it isn't. And I don't think I'll ever find it again."

He made his second U-turn of the morning and we drove back the way we'd come.

I chuckled again. "*Mr. and Mrs. John Smith*. Really, Ralph, some people have no imagination."

Ralph took his eyes off the road. "Henry."

"Yes?"

Then he sighed. "Nothing, Henry. Nothing."

We got to Milwaukee well before noon.



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